

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 31, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 611:1-5, 605:1, 155, 609, 50.
Lessons: Ezek. 34: 11-24, 2 Pet. 3: 1-18, Matthew 25: 1-13.
Sermon Text: Matthew 24: 1-3.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Jesus spoke these words in the last week of his life before his crucifixion. In those days Jesus really preached ‘like a dying man to dying men’. But his disciples probably didn’t notice the urgency in his words and work. At this time, his disciples were impressed with the temple King Herod had rebuilt.

Like the believers of the Old Testament, we are waiting for Christ to come into this world. They had God’s promise that he would come in due time. We also have God’s promise that he will come again in due time. They waited more than 4000 years before Christ came. God alone knows how long we shall have to wait. Their waiting was characterized by much trouble and tribulation, false hopes, impatience, unfaithfulness, persecution, violence, blood-shed, and oppression. Jesus makes it clear that it will be no different for us New Testament believers.

In Old Testament times, a majority of people looked for an earthly king and for earthly things. People today are no different. People today, including us are, for the most part, more interested in material things than in spiritual things. When people look to God at all, they look for him to give us what we want rather than what he has promised to give us. Many preachers today promise a millennium – 1000 years – of peace and prosperity with Christ sitting on an earthly throne in a reconstructed temple in Jerusalem. There are many other false ideas about the last days and the second coming of Christ. Scripture tells us that judgement day will be a day of rejoicing for Christians. Today, from the Word of God, let us look at some of the

SIGNS OF THE LAST DAYS AND THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST

- 1. We will not know when Jesus Christ is coming to judge the living and the dead.**
- 2. As Jesus gives us clues, we continue our preparation.**
- 3. So how do we prepare?**
- 4. What are we waiting for?**

We must carefully limit our preaching and teaching to what the Bible clearly says about the second coming of Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead. But in one sermon today we cannot list every promise about the future coming of Christ that he has given in Holy Scripture.

His disciples were wondering about Jesus’ second coming and the end of the world. We read that after Jesus left the temple he said. ***“I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”*** Later ***“the disciples came to him privately. ‘Tell us,’ they said, ‘when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’”*** From the Mount of Olives, even today, you are about 200 feet above Jerusalem, so they had a beautiful panoramic view of the city, and especially the magnificent, white stones of the temple. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, who also tells of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., the temple was made of massive, white stones, some of which were 37 feet long, 12 feet high and 18 feet wide. Archaeologists have confirmed this. But it was destroyed less than 40 years after Jesus spoke these words!

In chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's gospel, we read Jesus' prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem and his prophecies about the last days and his second coming.

To answer his disciples' question, ***“Jesus answered: ‘Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.’”*** False Christs had appeared even before Jesus came. Many, many false prophets have appeared in many places.

When Jesus speaks of wars and rumors of war, we may think of places such as the Middle East and Africa. Famines have ravaged nations such as Syria, South Sudan and many other countries. Earthquakes have caused incredible damage in many places around the world. Many Bible scholars have observed that the ***“signs of the times”*** were fulfilled already in the first generation after Christ. It is obvious from this that Jesus wants each generation of believers to feel a sense of urgency about the Last Day, because when we have no sense of immediacy or imminence, we tend to procrastinate. We devote ourselves to the pursuit of earthly possessions and pleasures and do not make the kingdom of God and his righteousness our first priority. Even in our New Testament epistle lesson this morning we heard Peter's observations about the scoffers who keep looking, don't see Christ's coming, and mock the believers.

Jesus speaks of these things that happen ***“as the beginning of birth pains.”*** When a pregnant woman experiences her first labor pains, they are usually relatively mild and irregular. The first contractions may happen months before the baby is actually born. But as the birth gets closer, the labor pains become more regular and more intense. Finally, she goes into what is called “hard labor” and the child is delivered.

In this chapter Jesus tells us that all these signs of the end are going to become more frequent and more intense as the world gets closer to the Last Day. Although we may feel that the world is in bad shape now, Jesus warns us that it will get worse. But his purpose is not to depress us. He is warning us ahead of time, so that when it happens we will not be tempted to wonder whether he has lost control of his world. So in the middle of this chapter, we find these words: ***“there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now--and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.”***

But Jesus is very emphatic that ***“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”*** In our epistle lesson, too, Peter tells us, as Christ does elsewhere: ***“the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.”*** If you know precisely when a thief is coming, you will definitely be prepared. But Jesus' point is that you don't know, so you must be prepared all the time!

When we read ***“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come”***, we must realize that the Gospel has been preached in all the world. Although there may be a few places in the world today where the gospel is not being actively proclaimed, we cannot point with certainty to any nation on earth and say that the witness of the gospel has never reached that nation. With God's gifts of modern communications such as radio, television, internet and satellite communications, the gospel cannot even be completely excluded from those nations whose leaders are avowed atheists or anti-Christian pagans. But we must not look at Jesus' promise that the gospel will be proclaimed to all nations before he comes as a bit of information that will help us to calculate the date of the end. It is rather a reminder of what our personal goals must be: to proclaim the gospel wherever and whenever we can. The message Jesus has given us to proclaim is the same one he himself preached: ***“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*** (Matthew 4:17 NIV)

When Jesus comes back, you won't have to go anywhere else to see him. Christ will appear to the whole world at once, as we read in the book of Revelation: ***“Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen.”*** (Rev. 1:7)

Jesus then combines two passages from Isaiah: ***“Immediately after the distress of those days ‘the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies***

will be shaken.’ At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” This is not just natural events, such as eclipses, or meteors falling into the atmosphere, but, as one writer said it is “the dissolution of the universe when he returns on the last day.” Jesus uses the same sign that he used before the Sanhedrin when we read in (Matthew 26:62-64 NIV) *“Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’ But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ ‘Yes, it is as you say,’ Jesus replied. ‘But I say to all of you: In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* The sign is that Christ will appear with his angels, who will gather the elect into his heavenly kingdom.

The *“loud trumpet call”* reminds us of St. Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: *“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.”* (1 Thessalonians 4:16 NIV)

So how do we prepare? Well, we don’t know when it is coming: *“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.”* The people at the time of the flood had been warned. Noah had been building the ark for 120 years! Do you think that he remained silent about what God had told him was going to happen? Even though they continued to mock him, he continued his work of preparing and proclaiming God’s Word also in his actions!

We prepare by gladly hearing and learning God’s Word. What a blessing that all of our families can read! What a blessing that you can all have your very own copies of the Holy Scriptures, God’s Word!

So what are we waiting for? We could think of the words of the next chapter: our Gospel lesson for this morning. That is the picture of the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the bridegroom to come. We are waiting for our heavenly bridegroom, Jesus Christ, the bridegroom who has given his very life for his bride, the Holy Christian Church. The wise were ready. The foolish weren’t. They thought they had lots of time. They thought, perhaps, that the bridegroom hadn’t come for so long that maybe he wasn’t going to come. They fell asleep. They didn’t stay alert and prepared.

Our Lord has prepared a place for us, and he will come again to take us with him. What a blessing that we have such faith as a gift from the Holy Spirit! As we trust that Jesus Christ paid the price for all our sins, so we trust that he will come again to take me and all believers to be with him in heaven. May we be prepared! May we sing with Philip Nicolai:

“Wake, awake, for night is flying,” The watchmen on the heights are crying;

“Awake, Jerusalem, arise!” Midnight hears the welcome voices

And at the thrilling cry rejoices: “Oh, where are ye, ye virgins wise?

The Bridegroom comes, awake! Your lamps with gladness take!

Hallelujah! With bridal care Yourselves prepare To meet the Bridegroom, who is near.” (TLH, 609:1)

Amen.